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ABSTRACT

A data collection program identifies the attitudes and perceptions about teaching skills and the profession which preservice teachers exhibit at entrance and exit from a teacher education program. Survey questions covered the following areas: (1) expectations and perceptions about teaching; (2) perceptions of attitudes, knowledge, and skills; (3) classroom management ability; (4) knowledge of teaching methods and ability to apply them in the classroom; and (5) general understanding of teaching and the profession. (JD)

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Knowing Your Audience: Pre and Post Assessment of Pre-service Teachers' Attitudes and Perceptions

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Knowing Your Audience:
Pre and Post Assessment of Pre-service Teachers'
Attitudes and Perceptions

Abstract

A data collection program identifies the attitudes and perceptions about teaching skills and the profession which pre-service teachers exhibit at entrance and exit from a teacher education program.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE:

PRE AND POST ASSESSMENT OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS'

ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS

Much has been said about the kinds of students who enter the teaching profession today. Foremost in the discussion is usually the SAT or ACT scores of teacher education applicants (College Board, 1989) or the absence of academic proficiency (Young, 1989). Absent from the discussion, however, have been data which provide a fuller perspective of the students choosing to enter the teaching profession. What kind of students are they? Where do they come from? What do they bring with them in terms of knowledge, skill, and understanding of what it takes to become an effective teacher? Do their perceptions of themselves as prospec-tive teachers change from the time they enter a program to the time they exit? Answers to these questions can be helpful to any teacher preparation program interested in updating its program and monitoring its student population.

A national longitudinal study like the Research About Teacher Education or RATE project (Zimpher 1987, 1988, 1989) is helpful but leaves individual programs uncertain how they compare to a national sample. Because the Department of Secondary Education at Utah State University was not satisfied with the limited data it had concerning its students, the department devised a survey procedure

for both entering and exiting students in its teacher education program. The department has been using and refining the procedure since 1985. The findings reported here are drawn from 1985 and 1987 and are based on entry data from 217 students enrolled in "Orientation to Teaching", the first course in the secondary education program; exit data came from 153 students who had completed their secondary certification requirements. The entry and exit data do not necessarily tap the responses of the same students, since students take at least two years to complete the program (see Knight, Duke and Palcic, 1988 for a full statistical analysis and survey instruments).

DEMOGRAPHIC AND PROGRAM INFORMATION

The men and women who enter the program are likely to have graduated from a medium-to-large high school located in an urban or suburban area in the intermountain West. These findings parallel those of the RATE project which found that most teacher candidates come from homes close to the campuses they attend (Zimpher, 1989). These students enter with an average gpa of "B" and maintain that average through graduation and certification. Most of the students carry 15 credits per quarter and spend 15-20 hours studying. Approximately 60% of the students who consider becoming secondary teachers complete their programs and receive a secondary teaching certificate. The gender configuration of entering and exiting students stays fairly constant with females predominating slightly (58 percent at entry; 54% at exit).

Non-traditional students

One of the more pronounced changes in teacher education is the increased number of non-traditional students (those aged 25 or older) pursuing teaching certificates (Zimpher 1987, 1988). Many of these are women returning to school after a number of years, but a majority in this study sample are men who take more than four continuous years of college to complete their degrees and teacher certification.

Table 1 shows that 20 percent of the women and 30 percent of the men enter the program when they are 25 years or older. The difference is even more striking at the exit point. An interesting footnote to this phenomenon is the point at which a decision is made to pursue a career in teaching. As shown in Table 2, most traditional students, those under 25 years of age, decide as freshmen (43 percent) to become teachers or as juniors (36 percent) but a surprising number of non-traditional students (26 percent) wait until after they receive their degree before deciding upon teaching as a career. Women, in general, decide earlier to become teachers and complete their programs at an earlier age.

There is a striking difference in the amount of time that men and women take to complete their teacher training programs. As noted in Table 1, 70 percent of the entering men were 17-24 years of age; but in the exit population, only 25 percent were under 25 while 75 percent were 25 years of age or older. One explanation for this difference is that a large proportion of the males in this study are Mormons and it is customary that Mormon men complete a

two year mission for their church, usually between the ages of 19-21. This two year interruption delays graduation and completion of the teacher training program; another factor, however, is that as a result of the teaching experience gained as a part of their missionary work, some men who had not previously considered teaching as a career decide to become teachers. Another group of men and women (26 percent) as seen in Table 2, decide to become teachers only after completing their bachelor's degree. Finally, a large majority (74 percent) of the non-traditional students are married and have more family and financial obligations; this situation may become another factor in delaying their completion of their programs.

Sources of Financial Support

A large majority of the students in the study sample work while attending college; at entry, about 66 percent work 20 hours per week to support themselves; at exit, 82 percent work at least 20 hours per week in some paid employment. As is customary in most teacher preparation programs, students are strongly advised not to work during their student teaching. Apparently as the result of effective advisement and good student planning, the majority of students do not work during their student teaching quarter and those who must work substantially reduce their hours. Upon completing the program, more men (76 percent) report being married than females (51 percent). This is a substantially higher percentage than that for elementary education majors (32.8%)

reported by the RATE project (Zimpher, 1989). The men also indicate that they receive more financial support from their spouses than do women (41 percent to 27 percent).

Prior Teaching Experience

Students who enter the teacher education program tend to have considerable teaching experience in volunteer settings. About two-thirds of the students have had experience in church teaching, more than a third have served as coaches, and about a fourth have served as camp counselors or in Boy or Girl Scout programs. Men over 25, who have earned their bachelor's degrees before certifying typically have more prior teaching experience as coaches and church teachers.

EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING

At a time when education and schools in general have been heavily criticized by the media, students preparing to become teachers might be expected to have some concern about their choice of career. A majority of entering students, however, felt that the criticism teachers receive is not justified and that most teachers work hard and are "pretty effective." In fact, 20 percent of the entering students indicated that they had selected teaching as a career because they thought they would be able to help in the reform movement to make education even stronger.

The issue of low salaries, even though widely reported in the media, did not seem to be a major deterrent. Fifty-three percent

of the women and 41 percent of the men indicated they were committed to teaching because "the job is important enough in spite of the low salaries." However, about one-third of both men and women had real concerns about low pay as a reflection of the low esteem the teaching profession had in the eyes of the public.

Men rather than women tended to be somewhat more apprehensive about becoming teachers. A primary reason is financial security. Sixty percent of the women expect that their husbands will work so that the family will have two incomes, but only 46 percent of the men expect their wives will work. Probably as a result of these differing expectations, 13 percent more men than women expect to have summer jobs and 5 percent more men than women expect to hold part-time jobs during the school year. Finally, 25 percent of men have or expect to have a business/farm, etc., to supplement their teaching salaries compared to only 2 percent of the women. These findings echo the concerns found in the RATE project where 89 percent of the respondents felt that current teaching salaries were inadequate to meet the needs of a family (Zimpher, 1989).

PERCEPTIONS OF ATTITUDES, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Students at entry and exit were asked to rate themselves on their current attitudes, knowledge, and skills, using a five point Likert scale. In general, entering students rated themselves confident, competent, and committed and tended to emerge from the program with the same, if not higher, regard for their abilities.

Discussed below are a representative sampling of some of the items to which they responded.

Classroom Management

Ability to relate to young people.

When entering students rated their abilities to relate to young people, 91 percent of the women and 93 percent of the men rated themselves as "high" or "very high." At exit, 93 percent of the women and 92 percent of the men rated themselves in a similar fashion. Although both men and women saw themselves as better able to relate to young people upon completion of the program, 10 percent more women than men rated themselves as "very high."

Ability to earn students' cooperation and maintain order

Prior to student teaching, future teachers often express concern about their ability to maintain order and discipline in the classroom. As they entered the program, 35 percent of the students rated their abilities in this area as only "adequate," 56 percent rated themselves "high" but only 8 percent considered their ability "very high." After student teaching and the completion of their program, the self-ratings showed a shift, with only 14 percent now rating themselves as "adequate," while 71 percent considered their abilities as "high" and 14 percent rated themselves as "very high."

Ability to organize and manage the details of a classroom

In this related area, 75 percent of women at entry rated themselves as "high" or "very high" and at exit, 86 percent of the women rated themselves in these categories. In contrast, only 63

percent of the men at entry rated themselves in the same categories, but the level of confidence rose to 83 percent at exit.

Ability to deal skillfully with students who cause serious discipline problems

As they enter the program, 64 percent of the female students rated themselves as only "adequate" in their abilities to deal with serious discipline problems and only 25 percent rated themselves "high." After student teaching and completion of the program, however, ratings for women change dramatically, with only 42 percent rating themselves as "adequate," while 55 percent rate themselves as "high" or "very high." Only 2 percent, as opposed to 10 percent at entry, considered themselves "low" in ability. Men tended to start off with more confidence in this area with 42 percent rating themselves as "high" or "very high" at entry and this figure increased to 60 percent at exit.

Ability to help handicapped students in the classroom

In estimating their abilities to help handicapped students, men were more confident than women at entry, but less sure of themselves at exit. For example, 11 percent of the men rated themselves as "very high" at entry but this declined to 6 percent at exit.

Ability to create an accepting climate in which students feel free to ask questions and/or engage in discussion

College students who consider becoming teachers usually like to discuss issues with friends and believe that they are quite skillful in creating a climate conducive to discussion. At entry,

78 percent of women and 80 percent of men rated themselves "high" or "very high" in this area. At exit, 93 percent of the women and 94 percent of the men placed themselves in those categories. There is some research, however, (Redfield and Rousseau, 1981) which suggests that prospective teachers tend to overestimate their skills in this area.

Ability to ask interesting questions and lead a class discussion or demonstration

Prospective teachers seem more realistic in assessing their abilities to ask effective questions and conduct discussions than in setting the climate for discussion. Fifty-eight percent of the entering students rated themselves as "high" or "very high" on this ability whereas 78 percent of the women and 88 percent of the men rated themselves in those categories upon completion of the program.

One skill in this area where women seemed to have more confidence than men was in the ability to listen. More women rated themselves in the "high" or "very high" categories at entry (77 percent to 56 percent) but this difference disappears at exit when 84 percent of women and 85 percent of men rated themselves as "high" or "very high."

Knowledge and Application

This area was designed to assess prospective teachers' knowledge of rather specific teaching methods and techniques and their ability to apply these in their own classrooms. Prospective teachers appeared to be very optimistic about their knowledge and

abilities upon entering the teacher training program; as they completed the program, these same individuals continued to exhibit considerable confidence in their abilities but somewhat more modestly and realistically than at entry.

Confidence in content knowledge

At entry, 75 percent of women and 77 percent of men rated themselves as "high" or "very high" on knowledge of their subject matter in their majors. At the completion of the program, which typically included at least 45 hours in a teaching major and 30 hours in a teaching minor, 91 percent of the women and 90 percent of the men rated themselves as "high" or "very high."

Ability to adapt and "translate" information to the level and interests of secondary students

Sixty-nine percent of women and 76 percent of men rated themselves as "high" or "very high" at entry on their ability to adapt and translate information appropriately for a secondary school population; this rating rose to 75 percent for women and 86 percent for men at exit.

Knowledge of and ability with effective teaching methods and techniques

Future teachers were much more modest about their knowledge of effective teaching methods, both before and after completing the program. At entry, 48 percent of the women rated their knowledge as only "adequate" and only 32 percent rated themselves "high" or "very high" in this category. At exit, 51 percent of the women rated themselves in the "high" or "very high" categories; at entry,

39 percent of the men rated themselves "high" or "very high" but this rose to 71 percent at exit.

In terms of their ability to apply effective teaching methods and techniques, 44 percent of the women at entry considered their abilities "high" or "very high," while only 39 percent of the men placed themselves in these categories at entry. Upon exit, 79 percent of the women placed themselves in the "high" or "very high" categories and 71 percent of the men did likewise.

Because it was assumed that students would have little or no knowledge about some of the more technical teaching skills at entry, they were asked to rate themselves only at exit on such areas as teaching reading skills within a content area, incorporating study skills techniques, utilizing time on task behaviors, promoting student achievement on standardized tests, incorporating computer skills into content areas, etc. In general, men tended to rate themselves slightly higher than women in these areas but both populations saw their knowledge and abilities in these areas at exit to be at least "adequate" or higher; however, there tended to be a much more conservative appraisal of knowledge and ability in these areas than in areas related to attitudes and general understanding.

GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHING AND THE PROFESSION

Upon exiting from the program, both men (89 percent) and women (96 percent) had a "high" or "very high" appreciation of the complexity of teaching. Upon entering the program, both males and

females (70 percent) rated themselves as "high" or "very high" in making the transition from student to teacher. At exit, however, more males (96 percent) see themselves as better able to make the transition from student to teacher than women do (82 percent). Both women and men, however, show substantial gains from the beginning to the end of their programs in their ability to maintain idealism in the face of discouraging public support of education. At entry, 56 percent of both men and women rated themselves as "high" or "very high" in this general category and this rating rose to 87 percent at the end for both genders.

The level of commitment to teaching as a career remained high with these students. At entry, almost 80 percent of the students rated their level of commitment as "high" or "very high" and at exit, this percentage dropped only slightly to 75 percent. This level of commitment is particularly gratifying in light of the general pattern of interest in teaching exhibited by students nation-wide. In 1968, nearly 23 percent of entering college freshmen across the country expressed interest in teaching as a career; that declined to less than 5 percent in 1982 and then began to rise in 1987 (Rothman, 1988, p. 5). In another recent nation-wide poll of high school seniors, 22 percent indicated an interest in teaching as a career--about the percent that the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy predicts will be needed to fill classrooms in the 1990s (Clark, 1987, p. 503).

Although male prospective teachers consistently rated themselves as more self confident than did their female

counterparts, both were substantially more self confident at the completion of the program. As they entered, 79 percent of the men and 61 percent of the women gave themselves a "high" or "very high" rating but at exit, 92 percent of the men and 80 percent of the women rated themselves in those categories.

This general pattern of self confidence was mirrored in students' perceptions of their abilities to teach successfully. At entry, 83 percent of the men and 71 percent of the women rated themselves as "high" or "very high" in this category; at exit, 94 percent of the men and 86 percent of the women rated themselves at those levels.

SUMMARY

In this sample population, the typical male student in secondary teacher education was likely to be about 22 years of age at entry and more than 25 years of age at exit. The typical female student was likely to enter and complete the program about 2 years sooner. Both men and women tended to come from medium-to-large high schools in urban or suburban Utah or the intermountain West.

The typical student in this study tended to enter the program with a 2.7 gpa and raised that to a 3.0 by the time of completion. The average student spent about 20 hours per week studying and carried 14-16 hours per quarter. Most of the students worked part-time to support themselves and supplemented this with support from spouses, and other sources of financial aid. About 60 percent of those who considered secondary teaching as a career actually graduated and applied for certification. As a group, the students

tended to be confident about their abilities to teach well and expressed a surprising level of commitment to a teaching career in spite of the potential for negative criticism from the public and the prospects of low pay.

These future teachers are surprisingly optimistic about a career in teaching but women do appear to be somewhat more apprehensive than men about it as a career choice. Initially, women tend to be more concerned about handling serious discipline problems, their ability to help handicapped students, and their levels of knowledge in their major and minor fields. And yet, women do well in their academic work, often out performing their male counterparts. Although still not at the same levels as their male counterparts, their level of confidence and commitment do rise substantially.

This study does suggest further areas for research. One of the most noticeable ones is the continual disparity between male and female perceptions about their abilities. Such a disparity, however, seems not to be unique to education. It should be noted that the findings of this study reflect the research in adolescent and adult development. Papalia and Olds (1981), two developmental psychologists provide the following view:

> Male and female students have tended to develop differently, both intellectually and with regard to personality, and in recent years the disparities have been increasingly questioned. One problem is that women students

> have lower self-esteem and lower aspirations than men. When 3,347 undergraduates of six prestigious colleges were questioned, 61 percent of the men said they felt they were well prepared for graduate school, compared to only 49 percent of the women. More men than women expected to earn a doctorate, go on to medical or law school or into business management, while more women than men prepared assignments before each class, took careful notes, and panicked over exams and assignments (p. 361).

Other areas which should be examined further include those factors which contribute to the 40 percent attrition rate in the program as well as how that rate compares to that of comparable programs; a follow-up study of graduates of the program who have been teaching for several years could provide useful insights into the effects of the program along with a survey of administrators' view of the program's graduates. Also of interest would be a replication of the surveys in other regions of the United States and a comparative study of pre-service teachers' attitudes and perceptions in elementary education programs versus secondary ones.

Overall, however, the results of this study are heartening. They suggest that students entering a secondary education teacher preparation program are confident, idealistic, and committed. Although they become somewhat more realistic as they move through

the program and discover that teaching is a complex profession, they retain a high level of commitment and idealism which bodes well for the health of the teaching profession in general and they emerge from the program believing they are well equipped to enter the profession.

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TABLE 1

GENDER AND AGE CROSS TABULATION

OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS AT ENTRY AND EXIT

ENTERING

	17 - 24	25+ YEARS AGE
FEMALE	80%	20%
MALE	70%	30%

EXITING

	17 - 24	25+ YEARS AGE
FEMALE	71%	29%
MALE	25%	75%

TABLE 2

YEAR IN SCHOOL AT WHICH STUDENTS
DECIDED TO BECOME PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS
CROSS-TABULATED WITH AGE AND GENDER

EXIT QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

	FROSH	SOPH	JUNIOR	SENIOR	AFTER BS
UNDER 25	43%	18%	36%	2%	1%
25 +	25%	22%	24%	3%	26%

	FROSH	SOPH	JUNIOR	SENIOR	AFTER BS
FEMALE	44%	13%	33%	4%	6%
MALE	23%	28%	28%	1%	20%